

Light



...on a new world

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The Christadelphians believe the Bible (Old and New Testaments) to be the wholly inspired and infallible Word of God. Its principal theme is the salvation of mankind through the saving work of the Lord Jesus Christ and the setting up of the kingdom of God under his rulership when he returns to the earth.

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Cover: The Olympic Clock in Trafalgar Square, London

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Editorial

THE Olympic Games will be held in London from 27 July to 12 August 2012. The Olympic clock shown on the cover was installed 500 days before the Games and is counting down the days, hours, minutes and seconds to the start of the Games. London is the only city to host the modern Olympic Games three times – in 1908, 1948 and 2012. From 241 competitors representing 14 nations in 1896, the Games have grown to almost 11,000 competitors from over 200 countries at the 2008 Summer Olympics. A similar number are expected to take part in the Games in 2012.

The celebration of the Games goes back more than 2,000 years to ancient Greece. It encompasses many rituals and symbols, such as the Olympic flag and torch, as well as the opening and closing ceremonies. There are many different sports and 300 separate events. The first, second and third place finishers in each event receive Olympic medals – gold, silver and bronze, respectively.

The Games are open to competitors from all over the world, to all who are willing to compete. The unifying aspect of this world-wide competition is represented by the symbol of the Olympic Games, composed of five interlocking rings. This symbol was originally designed in 1912 by Baron Pierre de Coubertin the founder of the modern Olympic Games. It's ironic that soon afterwards the Olympic Games had to be suspended because of the outbreak of the First World War. However the symbol was later adopted and made its debut at the 1920 Games which were awarded to Antwerp to honour its people after the suffering they endured during the War.

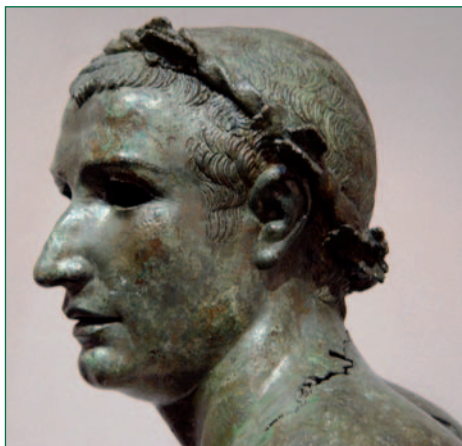
There are no age limits on the competitors. The oldest modern Olympian in history is Swedish shooter Oscar Swahn. He won a silver medal at the 1920 Antwerp Olympics at 72, his sixth medal in three Games. The successful winners have come from all over the world and from many different walks of life, often unknown, unexpected champions. We have seen winners from the hardest of starts in life and the unlikeliest of competitors, all training hard for the achievement of success and a gold medal. What is evident from

all the competitors is the dedication which they put into the preparation for their particular event. Each one has to believe that the end is achievable and work single-mindedly towards it.

In New Testament times, the Greek Games were a familiar part of life. The Apostle Paul made a number of allusions to the Games which provided powerful lessons for the followers of Jesus. At the end of his life he wrote to Timothy about a race of a different kind, a race in which the winners will not receive a gold medal but something of far greater value. These are his words:

‘...I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. Finally, there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will give to me on that day, and not only to me but also to all who have loved his appearing’ (2 Timothy 4.7, 8).

In the ancient Greek Games, the winner of an event was often awarded a crown of interwoven leaves as a symbol of victory. In the same way Paul reminds Timothy that he and all Christ’s true followers will receive a crown if they like Paul finish their course – not a crown of leaves that will soon fade away but a crown of righteousness that will qualify its wearer for the great prize of eternal life ‘*on that day*’ when Jesus returns.



As the clock on the cover reminds us of the countdown to the Olympic Games, the divine clock is counting down the time to the return of Jesus. When the Apostle Paul visited Athens he reminded his hearers that God ‘*has appointed a day on which he will judge the world in righteousness by the man whom he has ordained*’ (Acts 17.31). The following article shows how you too can run the race and qualify for the great prize that will be awarded ‘*on that day*’.

Editor



The race for life

ONE race stands out more than the Olympics, and that is the race for life itself. It requires no selection by a committee whose decision is based on prior achievement. The race for life is open to all who are called, who are willing to compete and who are willing to finish the course.

All sports have rules which fashion the shape of the sport and which guide teams and individual competitors. A whistle designates the beginning and end of a football match. No team would claim to have scored a goal during the warm-up session prior to the kick-off. Likewise, in athletics, the competitor who leaves the blocks before the starting gun is not allowed to claim the advantage. The universally accepted standard is that the race start time is the same for all competitors.

Accepting the rules

Each particular athletic discipline has its own distinct rules. The sprinter must not stray outside his lane; the steeplechaser must not avoid the water jump; the long jumpers and triple jumpers must not step over the board; the shot putter and hammer thrower can only enter and exit the throwing circles via the back of the circle. For every sport and every discipline the regulations, rules and codes of conduct seek to ensure that fair competition will take place.

To compete we must accept the rules. The rules make it clear what we have to do to compete. The rules tell us how we will be adjudged the winner. In the Bible, God tells us how to run the race for life and what we should do to please Him just as the rule book governs the race. It is not enough to be leading a good life. God sets out the specific conditions as Paul reminded Timothy:

‘...if anyone competes as an athlete, he does not receive the victor’s crown unless he competes according to the rules’ (2 Timothy 2.5 NIV).

The Bible is specific about the rules – about what pleases God and we can only learn this by reading what it says. Jesus said: *‘narrow is the gate, and difficult is the way which leads to life, and there are few that find it’* (Matthew 7.14).



That way is God’s way, just as the course of a race track is clearly defined. The athlete accepts the rules of the race, for the race provides the opportunity to give the finest exhibition of his talent. The love of the sport and the pleasure that his talent gives, provides the basis for his desire to compete. It is the same for all who compete in the race for life. Jesus said: *‘If you love me, keep my commandments’* (John 14.15).

The specified course

What then are the rules of the discipline that the athlete and the believer accept? The competition can only take place within a specified time and within a designated area. Paul underlined the oneness associated with the believer’s calling when he wrote to the Ephesians:

‘There is **one body** and **one Spirit**, just as you were called in **one hope...one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God** and Father of all...’ (Ephesians 4.4, 5).

If a course is laid out, then that course must be followed. All runners, for example, must run in the same direction. All competitors must not attempt to prevent others from doing their best. These rules are explicit. They have been carefully compiled and every competitor must know them. Paul wrote to Timothy:

‘...continue in what you have learned and have become convinced of, because you know those from whom you learned it, and how from infancy you have known the holy Scriptures, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work’ (2 Timothy 3.14-17 NIV).

Keeping to the rules

Inherent in the willingness of the athlete to compete, must be a knowledge and acceptance of the rules and being prepared to keep to them. If the rules are broken the competitor is excluded from the race for the prize and no one would accept the excuse, ‘Oh but I didn’t know the rules’.

The same applies in the ‘race for life’. Our baptism is our registration for entry and we would be unwise competitors if we entered the race not knowing what it entailed. We understand that the race will be for the duration of our life, or for as long as God wishes it to continue before Christ returns to the earth. Paul wrote to Titus:

‘...the grace of God that brings salvation has appeared to all men. It teaches us to say “No” to ungodliness and worldly passions and to live self-controlled, upright and godly lives in this present age, while we wait for the blessed hope – the glorious appearing of our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ, who gave himself for us to redeem us from all wickedness and to purify for himself a people that are his very own, eager to do what is good’ (Titus 2.11-14 NIV).

The course will extend over all areas of our life without exception. If we are an athlete then everything we do is part of the competition. The warm-up sessions in the training arena are as important as the competition itself. For the believer, all areas of his or her life are a part of the same race. We do not only run on Sundays which is the day set aside for communal praise to God. Our service to our employer, for example, is also part of our service to Christ. So is our service to our friends and our neighbours. No one should be excluded as Paul’s advice to the early Christians shows us:

‘Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility

consider others better than yourselves...look not only to your own interests, but also to the interests of others. Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus' (Philippians 2.3-5 NIV).

'The entire law is summed up in a single command: "Love your neighbour as yourself"' (Galatians 5.14 NIV).

Rather than seeking to outdo our fellow competitors, we will actively encourage them to give of their best. If a fellow steeplechaser stumbles at the water jump, rather than taking advantage of his indecision or weariness to race ahead, we will help him to regain his balance and not allow him to fall altogether. That way their dogged determination will inspire us, just as our caring will inspire them.

As individual sporting disciplines have become more technical, the pressure of winning has become more intense. As this intensity often tests the integrity of the individual, rules have been refined. In essence, rules retain the competition whilst seeking to restrain dishonesty. The rules we are given in 'the race for life' are not there to make life a misery and a grind but to help us to do better and in effect make life better. Paul gave this assurance: *'...we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him...'* (Romans 8.28 NIV).

Divine coaching

Jesus lived a life that is an example to us. The Bible's teaching about Jesus and his own teaching to his disciples show us clearly the standard we should seek to attain. In the same way as an excellent coach is one of the secrets to sporting excellence, so the Bible can coach us to excellence. Jesus in his early life was perfected by the careful training of his thoughts and actions. He was in constant communication with his Heavenly Father through prayer and he never ceased to ask for guidance and support. Paul told the Thessalonians to *'pray without ceasing'* (1 Thessalonians 5.17), knowing that through prayer we also will gain the help we need to lead our lives in the way we ought.

God gives us a clear direction that we can follow if we recognise His will

and not our own. The progress of our lives will become much clearer because we are assured that our Heavenly Father will always provide. It is through prayer that we can share our lives with God, asking for a blessing on our plans at the start of the day and thinking over what has happened at the end of it. Through this process of reflection and communication, our every action takes on the context of serving God and of allowing ourselves to follow the command to profit by every opportunity. It is this daily exposure to God and His Word that will train us to excellence. With our minds and bodies actively committed to ‘the race for life’ it is obvious that this must involve and include every aspect of our daily lives. We are running the race wherever we are and whatever we are doing.

However, just as athletes who would wish to run faster, throw further, or jump higher, will have times when they compete badly and fail to reach their personal best, so we, in trying to emulate the example of Jesus, fall short of the Divine standard.



For the athlete, this could mean the failure to gain the prize he has striven for, but this is not the same for the follower of Jesus. God, the judge of all our efforts, has given us His son who enables us to be forgiven for the sins that we commit. Jesus lived a perfect life and as a consequence, when he was crucified in accordance with God’s will, he was resurrected as proof that this too can happen to us. This is confirmed in the letter to the Hebrews:

‘...because Jesus lives for ever ... he is able to save completely those who come to God through him, because he always lives to intercede for them’ (Hebrews 7.24, 25 NIV).

LIGHT ON A NEW WORLD

Jesus, who led a life like all people, particularly understands our limitations and weakness and provides a way by which we can overcome them. We read in the letter to Hebrews concerning Jesus that he was

‘...tempted in every way, just as we are – yet was without sin.’
(Hebrews 4.15 NIV)

‘...he learned obedience from what he suffered and, once made perfect, he became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him.’ (Hebrews 5.8 NIV)

For the believer in God and the followers of Jesus, ‘the race for life’ is life itself. If we follow His teaching, God has promised us a blessing as rich as any victor’s crown. The Psalmist wrote:

‘The law of the LORD is perfect, converting the soul; the testimony of the LORD is sure, making wise the simple; the statutes of the LORD are right, rejoicing the heart; the commandment of the LORD is pure, enlightening the eyes...And in keeping them there is great reward’ (Psalm 19.7, 8, 11).

The competitors in the 2012 London Olympics will be striving to obtain a great prize - a coveted gold medal. In the next issue, we plan to focus attention on what it will mean to obtain the great prize of eternal life.



(Editor's note: This article is based on a special issue of Light published in 1988 to coincide with the Seoul Olympic Games)

Genesis – myth or historical record?

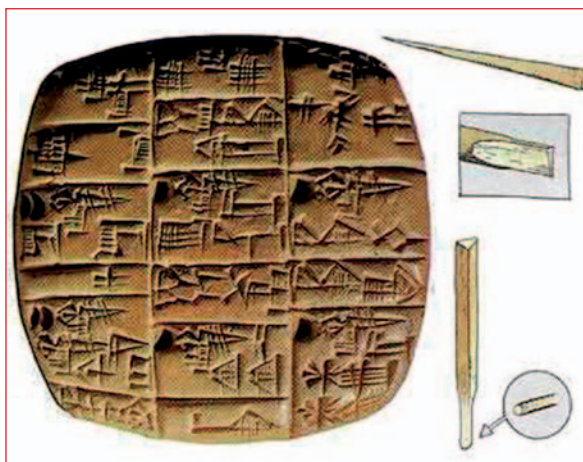
MESOPOTAMIA is an old name given to a region of the Middle East lying between the Tigris and Euphrates rivers sometimes called The Fertile Crescent, in what now includes parts of Iraq, Iran, Syria and Turkey. In the times recorded in Genesis, the first book of the Bible, Mesopotamia was divided into many small nations.

As these civilisations had dealings with God's people, their archaeological legacy is important to Bible students. In particular, many thousands of texts have been uncovered – amongst the earliest historical records in the world. These texts, inscribed on clay in cuneiform script and then baked, have resisted the passage of time. Although much work remains to be done, scholars have made some interesting discoveries.



Map of Mesopotamia

Cuneiform was the script used by many languages, just as many languages use the Roman alphabet. Cuneiform characters appear somewhat like daggers but this script should not be regarded as primitive. It was a highly



Cuneiform tablet and writing instruments (styli)

sophisticated means of writing with strict rules of grammar and spelling. In quality, as well as quantity, it represents the outstanding achievement of ancient peoples who created some remarkable compositions. Cuneiform languages are now dead – they were translated with the help of inscriptions and other texts written in cuneiform and other languages such as Aramaic.

Many of these early historical records date back to the time before the first five books of the Bible were written by Moses under divine inspiration. They were written in a land that is a long way from where Moses lived and it is most unlikely that he borrowed his account from Mesopotamia. These independent histories enable us to make useful comparisons with the Bible. Do the records of these ancient nations confirm or explain the Genesis record? Are they consistent with it or do they deny it? Can they make the Bible live a little more in our minds?

Creation

There are a number of creation accounts in addition to Genesis. One of the earliest is the Atrahasis Epic which tells us that man was created from clay – not very different from the dust of the earth mentioned in Genesis chapter two where we read that *'the LORD God formed man of the dust of the ground'* (Genesis 2.7). Another Mesopotamian account of creation, discovered at Kuyunjik, near Nineveh, refers to the separation of earth from heaven very much in the same way as the Genesis account (Genesis 1.6-8). There are key similarities which indicate a broad confirmation of the Biblical account in Genesis written by Moses under Divine inspiration.

The fall of man

A seal in the British Museum in London brings the Bible record to life. This seal measures some two inches in length and is known as the ‘Temptation Seal’ because it is thought to represent the temptation and fall of man in the garden of Eden.



The seal shows a tree with fruit being taken by a man and woman. *‘So when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, that it was pleasant to the eyes, and a tree desirable to make one wise, she took its fruit and ate. She also gave to her husband with her, and he ate’* (Genesis 3.6). The seal also shows a serpent, as in the Genesis account. Whilst we cannot be absolutely certain that this is what the maker of this seal had in mind, it is at least quite likely that it was the fall of man as recorded in Genesis. After all, if the events of the early part of Genesis had such a profound effect on mankind, as indeed they have, it would not be at all surprising for them to be represented in this way.

Of course, we are looking at a period before history became a quest for precise truth. Some of the events would have, the Bible apart, been handed down by word of mouth with the potential for the introduction of errors. In some cases, the errors may have been deliberate when a ruler desired to have a sanitised record of his achievements, which may in reality have been rather more modest than he would have liked posterity to believe. Some will feel that a faulty account is not worth much.

However, even if the details of these human records err a little and do not agree entirely with the Bible, that is not surprising from human writers, unaided by the Divine inspiration of the Scriptures. Names of people differ but one would hardly expect otherwise. It is of the greatest interest that the general message of an inscription may well offer a worthwhile confirmation of the Biblical account. Remember that these Mesopotamian inscriptions are

independent of Scripture, the inscriber had no access to the manuscripts that now make up our Bible. It is quite inconceivable that people in Mesopotamia were in any way influenced by the Bible 3,000 and more years ago. No, what we find there has to be accepted as truly independent.

The Flood

The Epic of Gilgamesh was written on 12 clay tablets in cuneiform script which was translated many years ago. These tablets came from ancient Sumeria which was just to the North of the Persian Gulf, in the region of Basra (now part of Iraq). In this epic, it is claimed of Gilgamesh, a Sumerian king, that *'He saw the Secret, discovered the Hidden, he brought information of the time before the Flood'*. The epic gives quite a large amount of information and this includes some highly specific details. It is set in Shuruppak, a city about 200 miles northwest of the Persian Gulf on the river Euphrates.

Extract from the Epic of Gilgamesh

‘...build a boat! Abandon wealth and seek living beings! Spurn possessions and keep alive living beings! Make all living beings go up into the boat. ...Roof it over...the carpenter carried his hatchet, the reed worker carried his flattening stone...Three times 3,600 units of raw bitumen I poured into the bitumen kiln...Whatever I had I loaded on it: All the living beings that I had I loaded on it, I had all my kith and kin go up into the boat, all the beasts and animals of the field and the craftsmen I had go up. Go inside the boat, seal the entry!

That stated time had arrived. I watched the appearance of the weather – the weather was frightful to behold! I went into the boat and sealed the entry. Just as dawn began to glow there arose from the horizon a black cloud made the dikes overflow and overtook the heavens, and turned to blackness all that had been light. The land shattered like a pot. All day long the South Wind blew, blowing fast, submerging the mountain in water, overwhelming the people like an attack...the flood was a war – struggling with itself like a woman writhing in labour. The sea calmed, fell still, the whirlwind and flood stopped up. I looked around all day long – quiet had set in and all the human beings had turned to clay!

...On Mt. Nimush the boat lodged firm, Mt. Nimush held the boat, allowing no sway. When a seventh day arrived I sent forth a dove and released it. The dove went off, but came back to me; no perch was visible so it circled back to me. I sent forth a raven and released it. The raven went off, and saw the waters slither back. It does not circle back to me. Then I sent out everything in all directions and sacrificed a sheep. I offered incense in front of the mountain. No man was to survive the annihilation!’

As previously mentioned, this account contains some relatively small differences from Genesis. This is not surprising as it was written down some 700 years after the flood without the aid of divine inspiration. The important similarities are of much greater significance in the external and unbiased testimony to the event. Not only does this epic support the Genesis account, a little additional information is provided. This is the place where the vessel was built. We cannot be certain of course but it does not contradict Scripture to say that the Ark may have been built at Shuruppak. There are other ancient Mesopotamian texts that confirm the flood.

Changing lifespan

Another interesting document is known as the ‘Sumerian King List’. This text gives a comprehensive list of kings in the ancient kingdom of Sumer but this is not its chief importance – there are two reasons why it is valuable. First of all, this list of kings mentions a civilisation before the flood and then describes a cataclysmic flood. Secondly, like Genesis, the text quotes much longer life spans for these kings (Genesis chapter 5). It also records a gradual reduction in life span. This is further evidence that life has not always been as it is today – as Genesis indicates.

Confusion of tongues

After the flood, mankind multiplied again and eventually tried to establish a single nation at Babel. To help establish this as a central community, mankind tried to build a great tower – the tower of Babel. There is evidence of towers, sometimes called ziggurats, in the region. Although we cannot be certain which one was the actual tower of Babel, we do know what these people could do. This tower was not being built for the best of reasons and did not fit in with God’s plan to populate the earth. So what did God do? He confused the language as we read in Genesis chapter 11.

‘Therefore its name is called Babel, because there the LORD confused the language of all the earth; and from there the LORD scattered them abroad over the face of all the earth’ (Genesis 11.9).

The result is that today there are 6,800 known languages being spoken in the world. That does not include dead languages such as those using cuneiform script. Does the confusion of tongues have any confirmation outside the Bible other than the evident multiplicity? Well, yes, it does as texts from Sumer in Mesopotamia show:

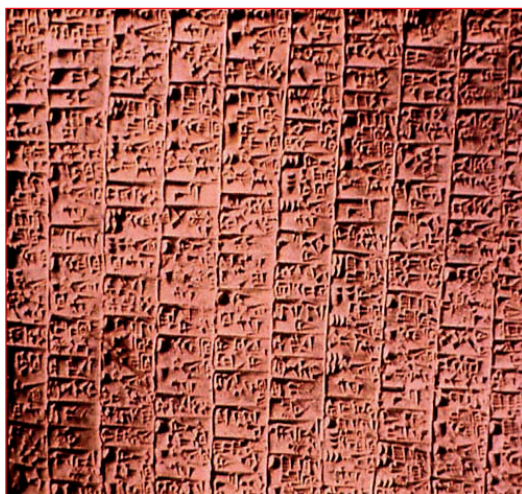
‘In those days, the lands of Subur and Hamazi, Harmony-tongued Sumer, the great land of the decrees of princship, Uri, the land having all that is appropriate, the land Martu, resting in security. The whole universe, the people in unison. To Enlil in one tongue spoke. Then Enki, the lord of abundance, whose commands are trustworthy, the lord of wisdom, who understands the land, the leader of the gods, endowed with wisdom, the lord of Eridu changed the speech in their mouths, brought contention into it, into the speech of man that until then had been one.’

All the elements of the confusion of tongues are present in this extract. It does not acknowledge the true God because man quickly reverted to the worship of false deities. However, the text gives striking evidence that this very important event took place as Genesis tells us.

The people of Genesis

The name ‘Ebla’ may not mean much to many people. It was an ancient town in what is now modern Syria. Ebla is of interest to the Bible student because yet another library of 17,000 ancient texts was discovered at this place.

Amongst many other interesting facts, these tablets mention the names of people connected with the region. It might surprise some to learn that the peak of



Ebla's importance came as long ago as 2500-2000 BC. On these tablets, a number of names are recorded including the names of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, as well as the names of Abraham's father, grandfather and great grandfather, Terah, Nahor and Serug. These names are also known from other sources in Northwest Mesopotamia in both Babylonian and Old Assyrian texts.

This cannot be dismissed on the grounds that these names were in common use because they were not. The names Abraham, Isaac and Jacob were not in common use at the time and have not been found in material from later centuries. However, men with these names did exist around 2000 BC and it is therefore quite likely that the actual people the texts refer to are the ones mentioned in Genesis.

The Law of Moses

God gave the Law to Israel by Moses. It is also apparent from the Bible that the principles of God's laws are consistent. It is also clear that God must have given mankind laws from the earliest times – that is implicit in the punishments God gave to those who disobeyed Him during the 2,300 years of history covered by Genesis. It would be interesting to see if there is any evidence of God's Law in ancient Mesopotamia. Do the laws of Mesopotamia show any influence of God, or are they entirely random laws of man's devising? There are several pieces of evidence that certain aspects of ancient law did arise from the law of God. One such example is the Code of Hammurabi.

Code of Hammurabi

This code was written by an early king of Babylon named Hammurabi and it is now in the Louvre in Paris. This dates from before the time of Moses and comes from a land he had no contact with. The laws it contains are not identical with the Law of Moses but they do show very similar principles.

This shows that the hand of God was active as we might expect from Genesis.



Conclusions

This article has considered a number of archaeological finds in Mesopotamia, particularly those with inscriptions and other written records. Quite naturally, these sources do not include the entire Genesis account – it would be quite unreasonable and unrealistic to expect to find everything mentioned in the book anyway. Indeed, it would perhaps be rather suspicious if anyone were to claim independent confirmation of the whole book. However, it is very significant that many of the key events of Genesis are supported from independent sources which confirm the truth of the book, one of the oldest parts of the Bible. The finds show that we can trust the Word of God.

There is an even more powerful confirmation of the truth of the whole Bible. Nothing has ever been found to disprove the historical accuracy of the Genesis account. Archaeologists and scholars have been at work for at least 200 years. If there were something out there to disprove God's Word, man has had every opportunity to discover it. Yet, he has not done so. There have been many claims that the people, places and events of Genesis had no basis outside the Bible. In the past, such arguments could be made even though believers in the inspiration of the Scriptures would not be deterred by them.

Today, it is not possible to argue that the history of the Bible is fictitious – far too much has been unearthed for that to be a credible view. As the Apostle Paul emphasised in his letter to Timothy: ***'All Scripture is given by inspiration of God...'*** (2 Timothy 3.16).

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*Note: For further information about Archaeological discoveries, send for your free copy of the special issue entitled **'Light on Archaeology'** (see back cover).*

The Development of the 1st Century Church

6. The conversion of Saul of Tarsus

I want you to use your imagination and travel back in time almost 2,000 years. It's another hot day under the searing heat of a relentless Middle Eastern sun. A party of weary travellers are making their way along a dusty road from Jerusalem northwards towards Damascus, a distance of some 130 miles. They have been travelling for almost a week now. It's approaching midday and in the distance they can see their destination. With renewed determination they hasten towards their journey's end determined to get there before sunset and the start of the Jewish Sabbath.

A blinding light



Suddenly without warning the leader of the party is stopped dead in his tracks by a blinding light far above the brightness of the noonday sun. He and his companions are struck with fear and throw themselves on the ground. And then they hear a voice speaking to their leader: *"...Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?"* And he said, *"Who are you, Lord?"* And the Lord said, *"I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting..."* (Acts 9.4, 5)

Then the awful realisation came over Saul that Jesus of Nazareth, the one his countrymen had crucified, was truly

risen from the dead and was now speaking to him. There was only one thing he could do and so the record tells us that *'he, trembling and astonished, said, "Lord, what do you want me to do?"'* (Acts 9.6).

The events which followed marked an astounding change in the life of this man Saul – from being a persecutor of the followers of Jesus, to being one of those who were persecuted for their faith.

Saul's former life

Think about Saul's background – a well educated Jew who was brought up in the Roman city of Tarsus and sent to Jerusalem probably at a fairly early age where he was tutored in the school of Gamaliel (Acts 22.3). He grew up to be a God-fearing person, and well versed in the Old Testament Scriptures. He later wrote letters to the believers in which he described his former way of life in these words:



‘For you have heard of my former conduct in Judaism, how I persecuted the church of God beyond measure and tried to destroy it. And I advanced in Judaism beyond many of my contemporaries...being more exceedingly zealous for the traditions of my fathers’ (Galatians 1.13, 14).

‘...If anyone else thinks he may have confidence in the flesh, I more so: circumcised the eighth day, of the stock of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of the Hebrews; concerning the law, a Pharisee; concerning zeal, persecuting the church; concerning the righteousness which is in the law, blameless’ (Philippians 3.4-6).

As a Pharisee, Saul belonged to a select group of religious Jews who had hounded and persecuted Jesus throughout his ministry and were instrumental in having him crucified. After the death of Jesus, the record indicates that Saul's zeal for orthodox Judaism marked him out as a suitable person for assisting the Jewish authorities in their attempts to apprehend all those who had forsaken Judaism to follow the teachings of Jesus of Nazareth. He is first mentioned in the book of Acts as being present at the stoning of Stephen where it tells us that he looked after the garments of those who participated in the stoning (Acts 7.58) and the following chapter confirms that he consented to Stephen's death. (Acts 8.1)

A mission from the high priest

The opening verses of Acts chapter 9 remind us that Saul was *'breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord'* and he went to the high priest in Jerusalem to seek authority to visit Damascus. His brief was to arrest any who had converted from Judaism to Christianity (Acts 9.1, 2). Yet something was lacking and his youthful vigour and misplaced zeal was suddenly and irrevocably redirected. The events on the road to Damascus had such an effect on this man that he immediately changed course – perhaps the most dramatic conversion to the Christian faith of all time.

That encounter with the risen Christ had a profound effect on him. His immediate spiritual enlightenment was accompanied by physical blindness for a few days and he had to be led by the hand into the city of Damascus. The realisation came upon him that all his previous efforts were totally misguided and we can imagine the devastation that came over him – knowing that he was responsible for the persecution, imprisonment and in some cases the death of those whom he now realised were the true children of God.

These things would no doubt remain with Saul for the rest of his life. The *'thorn in the flesh'* mentioned in one of his letters (2 Corinthians 12.7) could have been deterioration in his sight and this would also be a constant reminder of the life-changing events he experienced on the road to Damascus.

Repentance and conversion

Saul demonstrated his remorse and repentance and threw himself on the mercy of God in fasting and prayer, refusing food and drink for three days. This attitude of Saul marked him out as a man who had the right

characteristics for a very special mission – a mission that would eventually lead to the preaching of the gospel throughout the Roman world and the conversion of many Gentiles (non-Jews).

A disciple of Jesus called Ananias who lived in Damascus was instrumental in the calling of Saul to the work of the Lord. The Lord appeared to him in a vision and instructed him to visit Saul. He was naturally reticent at first, as the reputation of this man had travelled with him and instilled fear into many of the disciples. Nevertheless he obeyed the instruction with these words of encouragement: *‘Go, for he is a chosen vessel of mine to bear my name before Gentiles, kings, and the children of Israel. For I will show him how many things he must suffer for my name’s sake’* (Acts 9.15.16).

Ananias, with some doubts still in his mind, obeyed the divine instruction and went to the house where Paul was lodging on the street called Straight – the only named street in the New Testament – the name comes from a Greek word that means a narrow alley. (Such a street still exists in Damascus today running from the Eastern gate of the old city).

Ananias laid his hands on Saul and a miracle occurred: *‘immediately there fell from his eyes something like scales, and he received his sight at once’*. He also received the Holy Spirit but even more importantly the record tells us that *‘he arose and was baptized’* (Acts 9.18).

The process by which Saul became a Christian convert is vitally important for us. For the principles established in the first Century have not changed; this is the only way to become related to the true Christian hope. Saul demonstrated his commitment to Christ by repentance from his past way of life. It was a conscious decision made in the face of irrefutable evidence that the one he thought had been dead was alive. The miracle of his resurrection had demonstrated the power of God. It helped him come to a full realisation that Jesus of Nazareth was truly the Son of God and everything now fell into place.

Repentance leads to belief in the things concerning the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ. Saul’s knowledge of the Scriptures was previously incomplete – now he understood and believed that Jesus was the one promised in the writings of the prophets – the one called the Messiah (Hebrew equivalent of the Greek word Christ - meaning anointed). He was the anointed king of the Jews as confirmed by the words put over his cross at the orders of Pilate the Roman governor. The gospel (from a Greek word

meaning good news) that he had preached, was indeed good news for the world for it concerned the future establishment of the kingdom of God on earth with Christ as its king.

As he contemplated these great truths, Saul also understood the need for Jesus to die as a perfect sacrifice for sin, fulfilling the ordinances of the Law of Moses which pointed forward to his work as *'the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world'* (John 1.29). It was likely that Saul had been present when Peter was brought before the Council after the healing of the lame man at the gate of the temple. Peter had addressed the high priest Annas and the members of the Sanhedrin (the Jewish council) in these words:

'let it be known to you all, and to all the people of Israel, that by the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, whom you crucified, whom God raised from the dead, by him this man stands here before you whole. This is the *"stone which was rejected by you builders, which has become the chief corner-stone"*. Nor is there salvation in any other, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved' (Acts 4.10-12).

A vital step

The next vital step in Saul's conversion was baptism by full immersion in water. In previous articles in this series we have seen how repentance and belief of the gospel was followed by baptism. When Paul as he then became known (having changed his name at the commencement of his 1st missionary journey – see Acts 13.9), later recounted the events to the Jews in Jerusalem, he recalled the words of Ananias to him after his sight had been restored:

'And now why are you waiting? Arise and be baptized, and wash away your sins, calling on the name of the Lord' (Acts 22.16).

The act of baptism is the divinely provided means for repentant sinners to make a fresh start. Past sins are washed away and the believer starts a new life. Jesus described it as being born again when he spoke to Nicodemus: *'...unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God'* (John 3.5). Later in a letter to Titus, Paul described how salvation from death is only possible through *'the washing of regeneration'* (Titus 3.5).

Preaching in Damascus

Saul did not waste any time in redirecting his energy and enthusiasm for the things of God. His mission to preach to the Gentiles must wait. Having been a skilled student of the Law under the Rabbi Gamaliel, he could take advantage of the synagogue custom that invited any able Jew to speak about the Scriptures during the synagogue services (we recall how Jesus did the same – see for example Luke 4.16-30). Like Jesus, Saul preached a message that caused a great stir in the synagogue. Luke, the writer of the book of Acts, tells us that those who heard the message *‘were amazed, and said: “Is this not he who destroyed those who called on this name in Jerusalem”’* (Acts 9.21). Saul’s preaching also *‘confounded the Jews who dwelt in Damascus proving that this Jesus is the Christ’* (Acts 9.22).

Escape from Damascus

We can imagine the reaction of those who had previously regarded Saul as an ardent persecutor of the Christians and some began to plot his death. As he had previously schemed for the death of Christ’s followers, now they were scheming to do away with this traitor to the cause of Judaism. But God’s purpose with Saul was far from complete and a way of escape was found for him: *‘the disciples took him by night and let him down through the wall in a large basket’*. (Acts 9.25).

Preparation for his mission to the Gentiles

It seems that Saul then went through a period of preparation for his mission to the Gentiles. The book of Acts does not mention the time that Saul spent in Arabia but it’s referred to in his letter to the Galatians. When this happened has been subject to much debate. The letter to the Galatians strongly hints that it happened soon after his baptism in these words:

‘But when God, who set me apart from my mother’s womb and called me by his grace, was pleased to reveal his Son in me so that I might preach him among the Gentiles, my immediate response was not to consult any human being. I did not go up to Jerusalem to see those who were apostles before I was, but I went into Arabia. Later I returned to Damascus’ (Galatians 1.15-17 NIV).

What was the purpose of this journey? No doubt Saul would need time to himself, to re-consider the incredible change to his life and to dwell on the Old Testament Scriptures in a new light. Remember the New Testament did not exist in the days of the Apostles. How important then it is to study the writings of the Old Testament – we ignore them at our peril, for they explain so much about the mission of Christ both in the past and in the future. After his resurrection Jesus had to enlighten the twelve. Luke tells us that *‘beginning at Moses and all the prophets, he expounded to them in all the Scriptures, the things concerning himself’* (Luke 24.27).

After this Saul returned to Damascus and then went back to Jerusalem. There he encountered problems with the disciples, who could not come to terms with the great change that had taken place in his life and wouldn’t accept him. We can perhaps imagine how dismayed Saul became at their reaction. At last their fears were allayed by Barnabas who presented him to the Apostles. They listened no doubt with amazement as they heard what had happened on the road to Damascus.

Saul the persecutor once more became Saul the persecuted as he learned about another plot to kill him and the disciples had to send him away to Caesarea, where he boarded a ship and returned to his home city of Tarsus. As a result of Saul leaving there was a period of respite for we read that *‘the churches throughout all Judea, Galilee, and Samaria had peace and were edified’* (Acts 9.31). This respite enabled the followers of Jesus to consolidate their position and to continue with their preaching, the result of which was further growth in the numbers of believers.

Concluding thoughts

The conversion of Saul of Tarsus is a reminder that nothing is impossible with God. It demonstrates a pattern for all believers – as Paul the Apostle to the Gentiles, he later wrote to Timothy:

‘although I was formerly a blasphemer, a persecutor, and an insolent man; but I obtained mercy because I did it ignorantly in unbelief. And the grace of our Lord was exceedingly abundant, with faith and love which are in Christ Jesus. This is a faithful saying and worthy of all acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am chief. However, for this reason I obtained mercy, that in me first Jesus Christ might show all long-suffering, as a pattern to those who

are going to believe on him for everlasting life' (1 Timothy 1.13-16).

If Saul's conversion is a pattern, then we can share his experiences – we have to recognise that we are sinners and in need of salvation. Like Saul, in humility, we need to ask those two questions - firstly '*who are you Lord?*'. A correct understanding of the work of Jesus Christ as the saviour and his future mission is vital if we are to really know Jesus. Jesus himself said: '*...this is eternal life that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent*' (John 17.3).

Secondly, armed with this knowledge concerning the position of Jesus as the only one who can save us from death, we need to ask as Saul did: '*Lord, what do you want me to do?*' The process by which Paul became a believer is plainly taught by Jesus and his Apostles – knowledge of the Scriptures and an understanding of God's plan for the world centred in Jesus, led to belief of the gospel and this was followed by baptism. In another article in this issue entitled 'The race for life' (see page 3) we examine the divine requirements for those who wish to become true followers of Jesus.

The early chapters of Acts remind us that God began to call men and women from all walks of life and in the most unlikely circumstances to serve him. The Apostles were instruments to bring this about as they followed the Jesus' command to '*Go into all the world and preach the gospel*' (Mark 16.15).

In the previous article in this series, we thought about the preaching of Philip and the conversion of an Ethiopian eunuch. We have now considered the amazing conversion of Saul which from a human point of view seemed impossible. The next article in this series will focus on a Roman Centurion called Cornelius. We are reminded of the words of Peter after the conversion of Cornelius: '*In truth I perceive that God shows no partiality. But in every nation whoever fears him and works righteousness is accepted by him*' (Acts 10.34, 35).

Are you prepared to take the necessary steps to become a true follower of Jesus?

Editor



From our Mail Bag

A reader has posed a question about the correct Biblical perspective for a Christian to take concerning tithing, as there appears to be a different stance between Old and New Testaments.

The Hebrew words used in the Old Testament for tithe or tithing are ‘*asar*’ or ‘*maasar*’ and literally mean ‘a tenth’. The practice of giving a tenth was established before the Law given through Moses, as we read in Genesis. When Abram returned from the battle to rescue his nephew Lot, he came to Salem (Jerusalem) with the spoils of war and met Melchizedek the king priest and we read:

‘...he (Melchizedek) blessed him and said: “Blessed be Abram of God Most High, possessor of heaven and earth; and blessed be God Most High, who has delivered your enemies into your hand”. **And he (Abram) gave him a tithe of all**’ (Genesis 14.19, 20).

When Moses led the Israelites out of slavery in Egypt, a pattern was established to support the tribe of Levi as these men were selected to perform the priestly duties on behalf of the nation. The Levites needed to be supported as they had no means of looking after themselves. When they entered the land of Canaan (now Israel) they were not given any inheritance of land and a tithe (tenth) of all was required from all the people to provide the Levites with the necessities of life.

The duties of the Levites as priests and the tithes required from the people are recorded in Numbers chapter 18, where it is also interesting to note that the Levites in turn were required to give a tenth of the tithe as a heave (or wave) offering to God (Numbers 18.26). It was also possible for an individual to redeem his tithe, possibly because of necessity, in which case he could buy it back at a higher value. *‘If a man wants at all to redeem any*

of his tithes, he shall add one-fifth to it (Leviticus 27.31).

The practice of tithing was firmly established under the Law and in the very last book of the Old Testament the prophet reminds the people that when they do not give tithes they rob God:

“Will a man rob God? Yet you have robbed me! But you say, ‘In what way have we robbed you?’ in tithes and offerings. You are cursed with a curse, for you have robbed me, even this whole nation. Bring all the tithes into the storehouse, that there may be food in my house, and prove me now in this,” says the LORD of hosts, “If I will not open for you the windows of heaven and pour out for you such blessing that there will not be room enough to receive it” (Malachi 3.8-10).

Now when we look at the New Testament there is no mention of tithing being necessary for believers. The reason for this becomes clear from the writings of the apostles. The Old Testament whilst being a historical record is also a record of the prophecies relating to the coming of the Jewish Messiah, the Lord Jesus Christ. The Law of Moses was, as we read in the letter to the Hebrews, *‘imposed until the time of reformation’* (Hebrews 9.10) and was *‘a shadow of the good things to come’* (Hebrews 10.1).

In the teaching of Jesus known as the ‘Sermon on the Mount’, he refers to this: *‘Do not think that I came to destroy the Law or the Prophets. I did not come to destroy but to fulfil’* (Matthew 5.17). This declaration comes after Jesus had given the blessings we refer to as ‘the beatitudes’ earlier in the same chapter. Jesus, the Messiah, through his life and death fulfilled the Law and brought in a new dispensation. The Apostle Paul refers to this in his letter to the 1st Century Christians at Colosse, where we read that *‘he has taken it* (the requirements of the Law) *out of the way, having nailed it to the cross’* (Colossians 2.14).

The Christian community at Colosse was made up of both Jews who had previously kept the Law of Moses and Gentiles. Some of the Jewish believers found it difficult to understand that the Law was no longer applicable and Paul’s teaching in this chapter, makes the point that believers should not judge one another over aspects of the Law:

‘Therefore let no one judge you in food or in drink, or regarding a festival or a new moon or sabbaths, which are a shadow of things to come, but the substance is of Christ’ (Colossians 2.16.17).

When we put this all together we begin to see that the requirements under the Law given through Moses were superseded in respect of sacrifices, acceptable foods and if we wished to investigate it, especially relating to the need for male circumcision, marrying only Jews and keeping the Jewish festivals.

This then begs the question as to why some people feel the need to uphold one aspect of the Law and not all of it, especially the need in some religious communities for members to maintain tithing, but only in respect of giving money. The only logical course therefore would be to accept all the tenets of the Law or none of them, for we are not encouraged to pick and choose!

Jesus was very critical of the religious leaders of his day because they assumed that by keeping some parts of the Law they were righteous. However, as Jesus pointed out, they were only obeying certain aspects which suited them and only doing so by adherence to the letter of the Law. In doing this they were neglecting some of those aspects of the Law which were of much greater importance.

In Matthew’s Gospel record, Jesus accuses some of the religious leaders, the scribes and Pharisees, of being two-faced. Although they appeared righteous to the outside world, they were in fact self-righteous, hypocrites and subject to self-indulgence as summed up in these words:

‘Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For **you pay tithe** of mint and anise and cumin, and have neglected the weightier matters of the law: justice and mercy and faith’ (Matthew 23.23).

So how should the true believer in Jesus react to the idea of giving tithes? Firstly we need to remember that the ‘Ten Commandments’ given to Moses were embodied in the commandments of Christ and are totally bound up within the two great commandments as recorded by Matthew:

‘...You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind...You shall love your neighbour as

yourself. On these two commandments hang all the Law and the Prophets' (Matthew 22. 37-40).

Therefore, it is all about giving to God in thought, word and deed and expressing this in our interaction with others by giving of our time, support, forgiveness, mercy and money – but not just giving a set percentage of our income to the church. Paul wrote to the believers at Corinth:

‘...He who sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and he who sows bountifully will also reap bountifully. So let each one give as he purposes in his heart, not grudgingly or of necessity; for God loves a cheerful giver. And God is able to make all grace abound towards you, that you, always having all sufficiency in all things, may have an abundance for every good work’ (2 Corinthians 9.6-8).

Correspondence Secretary

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Parables of the Kingdom

The Nobleman

ALL the parables of Jesus are characterised by great economy of words. These simple stories powerfully convey many important aspects of his teaching in a way which captures the imagination of the listener. The enquiring student will discover hidden meanings and lessons to heighten his or her interest and appreciation of the teaching of Jesus. Like a master artist Jesus could paint graphic pictures to enforce his preaching of *'the gospel of the kingdom of God'* (Mark 1.14).

Background to the parable

Jesus spoke this parable to the crowd as he left Jericho to journey up to Jerusalem for the last time before his crucifixion. Luke is the only gospel writer to record this parable (Luke 19.11-27) and he states that Jesus introduced it at this juncture *'because he was near to Jerusalem and because they thought the kingdom of God would appear immediately'* (Luke 19.11). In the mounting crisis, there was evidently a general expectation that Jesus would assert his right to sit on the throne of David there and then, vanquishing the occupying Romans and establishing the kingdom of God. Luke describes how Jesus made his entry into Jerusalem riding a colt, accompanied by the loud shouts of an enthusiastic crowd: *'Blessed is the King who comes in the name of the LORD'* (Luke 19.38).

Within a week of his arrival, at his public trial before Pilate, Jesus was to bear witness to his kingship (John 18.33-37), foretold by the angel before his birth (Luke 1.30-33). Later that day he was crucified and over the middle cross outside the city, was displayed the challenging title:

'JESUS OF NAZARETH, THE KING OF THE JEWS' (John 19.19)

As the King of the Jews, Jesus is identified in the parable with *'A certain nobleman (who) went into a far country to receive for himself a kingdom and to return'* (Luke 19.12).

Jesus never discounted the conviction of his followers, that he would *'restore the kingdom to Israel.'* (Acts 1.6) The story of the nobleman enforces the truth that the kingdom of God was not then imminent. A long interval had to elapse before Jesus returned from heaven, the *'far country'* of the parable to accomplish all things at his second coming (Acts 1.10, 11). Remember his promise that *'if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and receive you to myself; that where I am, there you may be also'* (John 14.3).

The nobleman's instructions

Before the nobleman left for the far country, he called his ten servants. Each was given a 'mina' (Greek coin equivalent to 100 drachmas) and told to *'Do business till I come'*, or as another version puts it: *'Put this money to work...until I come back'* (Luke 19.13 NIV).

In the nobleman's absence the servants were expected to render faithful, responsible service – not simply maintaining possession of their master's property but using it to gain by industry and trading, an increase and profit on the original sum of money. At his return, the nobleman, having received for himself the kingdom, makes a final reckoning of the trading results achieved by each servant.

Unlike the parable of the talents, where the number of goods given for trading varies (see Matthew 25.14-30), in our parable each servant is given the same amount. The mina fittingly represents the common blessing of the Gospel. Jesus, as the earth's future king, gives to individual waiting servants equal opportunities to prove their loyalty and diligence in his absence. It is now that those left behind, as obscure traders, exhibit their true qualities, their fitness of character to qualify for nobler positions of distinction and authority in the coming Kingdom. The nobleman will be looking for growing maturity, as the waiting servants make their calling and election sure. The Apostle Peter wrote in his second letter:

'...he (Jesus) has given us his very great and precious promises...For this very reason (Peter says), make every effort to add to your faith (to this basic one mina gospel asset of the parable) goodness...knowledge...self control...perseverance...godliness...brotherly kindness...love. For if you possess these qualities in increasing measure, they will keep you from being ineffective and unproductive in your knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ...Therefore, my brothers,

be all the more eager to make your calling and election sure. For if you do these things, you will never fall, and you will receive a rich welcome into the eternal kingdom of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ' (2 Peter 1.4-11 NIV).

The servants judged and rewarded

The nobleman wished to know from each servant in turn, how much he had gained by trading his property. The command '*Do business till I come*', is an individual charge and we will be judged as individuals, on the basis of individual performance, as the Apostle Paul wrote: '*...each one will receive his own reward according to his own labour*' (1 Corinthians 3.8).

It is a mistake to think that all professing Christians will be saved 'en masse'. Christianity is an individual matter. We each have to work out our own salvation and are answerable to Jesus at his appearing for the way we have managed our lives (2 Corinthians 5.10; Revelation 22.11, 12). Entrance into his kingdom is not assured, but depends on personal effort and identification with the teaching and commandments placed on his servants by the nobleman, their future judge. Paul wrote about the materials that can be used for building on the foundation of Jesus Christ and he warned the builder that '*his work will be shown for what it is, because the Day will bring it to light. It will be revealed with fire, and the fire will test the quality of each man's work. If what he has built survives, he will receive his reward*' (1 Corinthians 3.13,14 NIV).

Ten and five cities

When Jesus kept the Passover meal with his disciples in Jerusalem on the night of his arrest in the garden, he encouraged them with the promise: '*...I bestow upon you a kingdom, just as my Father bestowed one upon me, that you may eat and drink at my table in my kingdom, and sit on thrones judging the twelve tribes of Israel*' (Luke 22.29, 30).

Similarly, in the parable, the two faithful servants are rewarded with authority over ten and five cities. Theirs was to be a literal inheritance of the earth, rulership over differing sized districts of this kingdom to be presided over by the nobleman, the appointed king.

How the first two servants were rewarded was in direct proportion to the accumulation of profit gained from the original mina. Both servants started out with the same money; the first achieved the best possible improvement – a tenfold increase, while the second gained five minas. These different

degrees of improvement, using the same opportunities, are reflected in the gradations of the final reward, varying ranks of honour and authority – rule over ten and five cities respectively (for similar teaching in the parable of the sower see Mark 4.20).

The Proverbs tell us, *‘Do you see a man who excels in his work? he will stand before kings’* (Proverbs 22.29). For the initial mina to gain ten minas by trading, it was necessary for the first servant to work exceptionally hard. We can say that the gift entrusted to him came to dominate his life. All other considerations were made subservient to the prime objective, as Jesus put it: *‘...seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness...’* (Matthew 6.33). Every trading opportunity was turned to profitable account which met with the approval of the nobleman who said: *‘Well, done, good servant; because you were faithful in a very little, have authority over ten cities’* (Luke 19.17).

His fidelity and perseverance in the seemingly small matters of everyday living, showed that he was worthy to receive the king’s favour and was fit to be elevated from a mere servant to high office and responsibility in the political constitution of the kingdom. His example, commended by the nobleman, illustrates the need for continual faithfulness, as the Apostle Paul wrote:

‘We want each of you to show this same diligence to the very end, in order to make your hope sure. We do not want you to become lazy, but to imitate those who through faith and patience inherit what has been promised’ (Hebrews 6.11, 12 NIV).

The wicked servant

The third servant, condemned by the nobleman as *‘you wicked servant’* (Luke 19.22) failed to occupy properly the time spent waiting for his master’s return. Not that he had squandered the money in riotous living, after the example of the prodigal son in another parable (Luke 15.13). *‘Master, here is your mina, which I have kept put away in a handkerchief’* (Luke 19.20).



To avoid loss or damage he had carefully concealed the money out of harm's way. The solitary pound, secreted away in a handkerchief, became a 'frozen asset' from a business point of view and of little value. Neglected in this way it was impossible for the servant to make any profit. Certainly, had the incident occurred in inflationary times, the unused coin would soon drop in value from its initial worth.

It is when he sought to justify his caution that we learn why the condemned servant performed out of a sense of duty the bare minimum, with this disappointingly negative response to the challenge offered, by having custody of the nobleman's goods. He said:

'For I feared you, because you are an austere man. You collect what you did not deposit, and reap what you did not sow' (Luke 19.21).

His excuse was a mistaken fear of what he saw as the harsh, unreasonable austerity of his Lord. The alleged exploitation of suppressed servants gave no encouragement for hard work, or for proper business management.

The man stood condemned by the words of his own self-defence. As the nobleman pointed out, even if such a harsh view of himself was correct, surely basic prudence should have compelled the servant to deposit the money in a bank, there to make at least a minimal investment gain from interest earned. By disregarding the charge to *'Do business till I come'*, he had refused to run any risk, or to inconvenience himself in any way. Out of fear and indolence he did nothing, and at the finish he lost all. The bystanders were told to *'Take the mina from him, and give it to him who has ten minas'* (Luke 19.24). By already proving himself capable of taking on even greater responsibilities, the first servant was further rewarded with the gift of the unused money.

Lessons for today

The end of the wicked servant emphasises the importance of having a balanced knowledge and appreciation of the ways and character of both Jesus Christ, the nobleman soon to return, and also his Heavenly Father, from Whom Jesus receives the kingdom. Right conduct will be our positive response to the privileges bestowed on those who now serve in the nobleman's house, trading with his goods. The nobleman inspires loyalty and diligence from his waiting servants, because of their indebtedness to him for giving to them all the same priceless hope of elevation to an inheritance in his kingdom:

‘For the love of Christ constrains us, because we judge thus: that if one died for all, then all died; and he died for all, that those who live should live no longer for themselves, but for him who died for them and rose again’ (2 Corinthians 5.14, 15).

A useless, self-centred existence is not what Paul means when he urges that we should live for Christ. Like those who used the money to good advantage in the parable, we need to make our lives productive *‘that you may lead a life worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing him, being fruitful in every good work, and increasing in the knowledge of God’* (Colossians 1.10). By diligent service and application, the first two servants increased the original asset of one pound. We also gain the same fulfilment in our lives, by total commitment to the challenge of trading in the goods which belong to our Master. He says to his servants today: *‘Do business till I come’*.

If we are lazy and complacent, if we do nothing, then we shall finish up as failures, our lives showing a nil profit, when the account of our service is reviewed by the judge. As the nobleman tells those present at the final reckoning:

‘...I say to you, that to everyone who has will be given; and from him who does not have, even what he has will be taken away from him.’
(Luke 19.26)

All the prophetic signs tell us that the kingdom of God will very soon appear. For this reason the parable of the nobleman has a particular message for those awaiting the nobleman’s return today. Wise are those who heed the instruction of Paul in his letter to the Ephesians:

‘See then that you walk circumspectly, not as fools, but as wise, redeeming the time, because the days are evil. Therefore do not be unwise, but understand what the will of the Lord is’
(Ephesians 5.15-17).

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Marvellous are your works

‘birds of the air have nests’ (Matthew 8.20)

THE great number of different types of birds’ nests, and the skill and ingenuity displayed by birds in the construction of many of them is another example of the wisdom of the Creator. An observer enlightened in the true teaching of the Word of God sees the hand of the Creator in giving them this inherent ability, and the wisdom to provide for their young a suitable home where they can grow until the time comes for them to go out into the wider world.

The writer has a book detailing the 850 species of birds that are to be found in and around the Australian continent. It also includes pictures of the 397 different types of nests that these birds build to lay their eggs and hatch out their young.

As can be imagined, the nests vary greatly in type, size and the materials used to build them. The sea-going birds such as gulls and petrels that inhabit the coastline have simple nests in the rocky areas near the sea. The inland birds such as plovers, dotterels and some types of pigeon, nest on the ground in a small hollow surrounded by a few pebbles. The birds that nest in trees have a great variety of nests. The parrots, of which there are a great number of species, nest in the hollow limbs of trees.

Other birds, such as the many varieties of the honeyeater, construct a skilfully woven nest from fine grass and thin strips of bark bound together with cobwebs, hanging from small branches of trees. There are other birds such as the fairy martin which use pellets of mud to build a nest which is shaped much like a bottle and is quite often attached to the roof of a cave or an overhanging rock. There is the type of nest such as that of the magpie lark which is made of mud and grass and sits on a stout tree branch.

Of particular interest is the Mallee fowl of Western Australia, sometimes called the ‘thermometer bird’ because of the precise way in which it can measure temperature. These birds, about the size of a domestic chicken, live in dense bush land and are rarely seen. They build their nest by scratching with their feet to heap up huge mounds of a mixture of earth, sand and decaying vegetable matter. These mounds can be well over one metre high

LIGHT ON A NEW WORLD

and three metres in diameter. The eggs are laid in the mound at the commencement of the rainy season and the heat generated by the decaying moist vegetation and the heat of the sun carries out the incubation of the eggs.



The male bird constantly monitors the heat of the nest and tests the temperature with his specially sensitive beak. He adds more covering or removes some to keep the temperature at 33 degrees C. If it varies by even one

degree, the chicks will not hatch. When the young birds emerge, they burrow out of the mound and run off into the surrounding bush and fend for themselves.

These natural wonders of the birds and their design to suit the many types of environment in which they can be found, speak to us of a Creator whose wisdom is so far above that of man, but whose love is seen in these aspects of His creation.

‘O LORD, how manifold are your works! In wisdom you have made them all. The earth is full of your possessions’ (Psa. 104.24).

Ken Woodall
Wongan Hills, Western Australia

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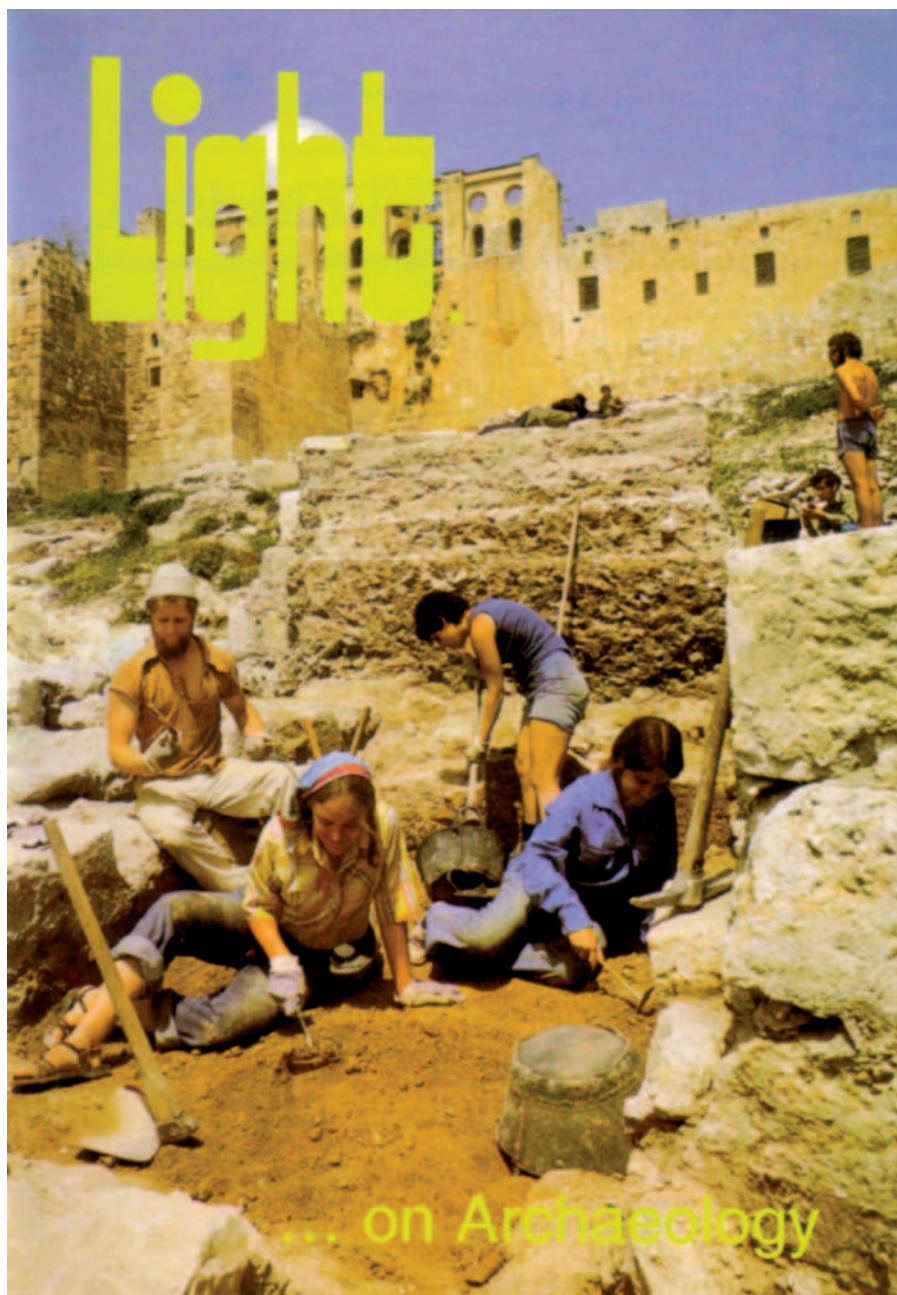
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